



# The Relevance of Orality the Performance Context and Ritual to the Concept of African Traditional Drama

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## Abstract

(1) Introduction. (2) The Problem of perception of African Traditional Drama. (3) Ritual and the Making of African Traditional Drama. (4) Orality and the Performance Context in the Making of African Traditional Drama. (5) The Dynamics of the Oral Performance Context.(6) Conclusion. Followed by References. The concept of African Traditional drama has elicited diverse and sometimes derogatory connotations in the past from alien and sometimes, surprisingly, indigenous African critics. The contention has always been that Africans lack a dramatic tradition comparable to the Western concept of dramaturgy. This paper, therefore, focuses on an analysis of what constitutes African traditional drama and posits that while the dramatic impulse is inherent in all human societies, the methods for the realization of that dramatic impulse may differ according to environmental needs and the societal concept of the aesthetics of literary composition and presentation.

**Keywords:** African traditional drama; Performance context; Ritual; Festival; Environment; performance histrionics; Orality.

## 1. Introduction

The term African traditional drama has been subject of controversy over the years yet theatre is one of the most highly distinguishing cultural elements that best exemplifies Africa or any other traditional cultures. Theatre manifests the entire gamut of African life and is at the lacuna of the sacred and what may be described as the “profane; or what constitutes orality and the latter written traditions that have come to characterize African society of the 21st century. Theatre best portrays Africans’ roots in the cosmic viewpoint and the predominance of orality which is the major ingredient of African identity and personality. While African theatre or African traditional drama can be conceived of as a mixture of diverse forms, it is as well rooted in the essence of African life and traditions. This is, however, not to lose sight of the fact that it can also be seen as an accretion of both the African traditional concept of dramatic presentation as well as the written or Western tradition of dramaturgy. Despite African drama’s affiliation with Western forms however, African traditional drama still exists as a distinct and unique form different from European or other Western dramatic forms. The realization of African traditional drama is therefore not consequent upon or dependent on Western concepts of dramaturgy. What this means is that African traditional drama does not depend on the existence of a text as it is the enactment of the totality of African life and experiecnecns. Furthermore, African traditional drama does not flourish on a procenium stage, a varitey of Kleig lights or on monetary returns for performances on the stage. It therefore, appears that in the absence of all these supposed necessities for dramatic enactment within the African context, Africans cannot be said to have developed or even to possess any dramatic traditions. This supposition is not surprising as it is not limited to drama alone but encompasses all aspects of Africans cultural life and literary aesthetics which have often been described as “primitive” and “worthless” from the Western point of view.

In the light of this scenario, it becomes pertinent for Africans to define concretely what constitutes African traditional drama against the backdrop of the prevalent Western concepts which are not necessarily sacrosant yet have seemingly become yardsticks for the measurement of all other forms of dramatic enactment. Given the classical and generally accepted definition of drama as an “imitation of life,” this imitation can be realized in various forms which may differ from culture to culture and region to region as dictated by the ecology of the environment and the cosmology or philosophical outlook of the people who produce the drama or are involved in the imitative activity. Perhaps one can surmise here that, in reality African tradition has not handed down to us a unique form of dramatic enactment or a specific theatrical system but there exist series of functions which in themselves constitute dramatic forms but which have been largely modified by colonial intrusion and have hence shifted from their original roots and observances even though never completely obliterated. It is therefore obvious, as [Kiguli \(2012\)](#) has aptly pointed out that

The failure to place the work, [in this case the dramatic construct] within it's proper context leads to the impression that these performances cannot occupy a central locus in the main literary discourses of Africa...it is when these genres that are usually labelled informal are taken up and studied with an awareness of the environment within which they operate that they can begin to acquire prominence ([Kiguli, 2012](#)).

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It is for this reason that this essay attempts a utilisation of Oral literature or specifically, the performance context as the basis for the theorisation on African traditional drama.

The study of the dramatic phenomena itself is therefore subject to diverse approaches just as the terms drama or theatre are subject to diverse and complex connotations in different parts of the world. This is because what connotes drama and theatre have become subject to human evolution and cultural changes as well as technological advancements in human society over the years. Concepts of drama and theatre have therefore been subject to human historical and cultural evolution and advancement thus giving birth to numerous approaches and styles of dramatic enactment. It therefore sounds more logical and appropriate to try to decipher the meaning and the evolution of African culture and its correlate, African traditional drama from within its unique and dynamic African traditional context or setting and the influences upon it than to resort to approximations to European cultural models and dramatic traditions that gave rise to their own unique dramatic and theatrical traditions based on their environmental and cosmic experiences. What one posits here therefore is that the functioning of society itself and the dynamics of societal cohesion or conflict generate and dictate artistic expression. One can therefore quickly posit that African traditional drama and theatre cannot but be deeply rooted in the cultural practices or folklore i.e. the myths, legends, ritual practices etc that dominate African life and the ceremonies which serve as celebrations that externalize African belief systems and concepts of the different African societies. Since orality is pervasive to Africa, African traditional drama and theatre cannot but be rooted in orality and the dynamics of the performance context.

## **2. The Problem of Perception of African Traditional Drama**

The problem of perception of traditional African drama therefore perhaps arises from its enactment of the totality of African life and the prevalence of orality that is not prone to fixity. The fluidity of realization meant that Africans hardly had any generic names or titles that designated these activities apart from the general descriptive term of “story-telling” and as [Mande \(2009\)](#) aptly pointed out, the problem with the perception of African oral literature, of which African traditional drama is part, lies in the fact that Africans do not name or describe their forms of literature adequately or distinctly, they simply live it i.e. the experiences. This explains the predominant composite nature of African oral literature. To Mande therefore:

...African traditional culture is inaccessible because most of it is oral rather than written and lived rather than formally communicated in books or journals and other sophisticated media technology.  
(Mande, 2009)

Every facet of African life therefore approximates to drama or theatre. Theatre is part and parcel of every day life and theatre is evident in everyday activities since music, dance and dialogue form integral aspects of African life. The performative is, as such, an integral part of African cultural life and defines African identity thus offering an example of perfect harmony between theatre and society.

To arrive at an understanding of what constitutes drama and theatre in Africa, therefore, one needs to look at the styles and ingredients of theatrical enactment that connect theatrical experience with the environment or milieu from which drama emanated. In an analysis of the specific elements that constitute theatre in its traditional or indigenous forms, one needs to look specifically into orality or the dynamics of the performance context as well as ritual enactments that form part and parcel of communal celebrations in traditional African societies where the forms are practiced. Orality and ritual seem to provide a synthesis of spectacle, rhythm and dance as well as dialogue or the spoken word, all of which integrate several modes of expression. It seems therefore, that it is to ritual, dance and masquerading as well as storytelling or folk traditions, with all their theatrical elements, that we must look for the seeds of traditional African dramatic essence.

## **3. Ritual and the Making of African Traditional Drama**

The supposition that African traditional drama largely depends on ritual is an age old anthropological one that derives from the erroneous concept of the inferiority of so called “primitive” races to which African societies were subjected. This concept of primitivism held sway in anthropological studies until recently when cultural anthropologists posited that the theory of primitivism is fallacious and based on lack of knowledge of alien cultures. They also argue that the so called primitive cultures are, in fact very complex entities that defy Western postulates about civilization and rationalism.

The argument about the derivation of African traditional drama from ritual has also been extended and likened to the fact that like Greek dramas which flourished out of the Dionysiac festival, African drama is an offshoot of ritual or religion. One quickly observes here that the fact that Greek drama grew out of the competitions at the Dionysiac festival does not necessarily make the drama ritual. The artists dramatized the human predicament using the Dionysiac festival as the platform. In the same way, certain aspects of African traditional drama may derive from ritual practices or may be rich in ritual content of all kinds and may have their origins in religious expressions and magic or the supernatural but this does not make them intrinsically ritual.

However, ritual did and still exists in honor of traditional deities who act as shields to defend the communities against evil forces which sometimes necessitated their appeasement through celebrations to ensure the survival and equilibrium of society. These ceremonies can be said to contain the seeds of dramatic production. This notwithstanding, Scholars like [Okpewho \(1979\)](#) have aptly argued that in African, as in most societies of the world, the aesthetic impulse predates the religious and is only brought to the service of religion. This means it is the accomplished artist whose services are employed or brought to the service of a deity in the carving of masks. It was therefore, the best dramatist’s creative works that were presented at the Dionysiac festival. Similarly, it is the

accomplished carver's masks that are utilized by acolytes to represent their deity and it is the creative and well endowed traditional orators that serve as the mouthpiece of the gods.

Basically therefore, the artist attains a sureness of hand before his employment at the service of a deity which debunks the concept of religion and ritual as the basis for nurturing artistic or dramatic activity. This means that though ritual exists as a means for the reaffirmation and perpetuation of aspects of societal existence and beliefs that are essential for communal, moral and spiritual cohesion, it is not ritual that determines dramatic and theatrical enactment or artistic production generally. Artistic production is dependent on the aesthetic impulse which emphasizes beauty over and above functional purposes. It follows that while ritual may contain the germ of theatrical performances, ritual is not drama or theatre. Conversely, it is worthy of note that while ritual is not theatre, theatre does employ ritual elements which has led scholars to suppose that ritual approximates to drama. Ritual operates at a higher level and is suffused with symbolic meaning and its enactment is dependent on concrete language beyond the ordinary and provides a meeting point between the human and the divine that is rooted, not on the principles of aesthetics and entertainment as drama is, but on the efficacy of the utterance.

The link between African traditional drama and ritual as [De-Graft \(1976\)](#) points out is the centre piece of the evolutionary theory of the origin of African drama which holds that myths, legends, folklore and history are the basic sources for African dramatic and theatrical presentation. This theory emphasizes the influence of religion on the development of African drama. The postulation here remains that even though the accomplished artist sometimes or most times doubled as the ritual priest, it is his artistic skill that comes to the service of the deity, meaning that something else is responsible for artistic excellence not ritual. We must therefore look elsewhere for the seeds of artistic and dramatic excellence. It is at this juncture that we must, of necessity, turn attention to the dynamics of orality and the performance context. Perhaps we can find the seeds of the dramatic impulse there in.

#### **4. Orality and the Performance Context in the Making of Traditional African Drama.**

The profusion of analytical interest on the ideological and ritual content of modern African drama led [\(Asagba, 1986\)](#) to assert that

...most discussions and essays on contemporary African drama and theatre...focused on areas of general criticism, autobiographical evidence and ideological content of the plays. No emphasis is placed on their performance context... [\(Asagba, 1986\)](#).

It is precisely this lack of a proper consideration of the dynamics of the performance context that has beclouded a proper perception of African traditional drama and made a consistent and sustained definition of the drama elusive. Asagba's interest may be on contemporary African drama but his postulation is also applicable, if not more so, to African traditional drama that is more prone to misconceptions. This realization underlies the analysis of the dynamics of the performance context as the basis for the definition of African traditional drama, not as a by-product of ritual but as a dynamic creative endeavor that arises from the aesthetics of artistic creation inherent in most African traditional cultures.

Drama, for its effective realization depends on performative elements and the African emphasis on a lived experience earlier articulated in [Mande \(2009\)](#) postulation. My interest here lies in the influence of orality or the oral tradition which is pervasive in African traditional societies and from which artistic impulses emanate. Having identified the degree of ritual content and its purpose in African traditional drama, one now proposes to examine the performance contexts of these so called ritual enactments as what really constitute the core of African traditional dramatic activity.

It is perhaps worthy of note that from the African traditional perspective no ritual act has meaning outside of or separately from the place or context of its performance. It is the performance context that enlivens the act or ritual as the case may be and gives it life and meaning as it allows for interaction between the participants involved in it and the deistic essence or otherwise. Therefore, in itself ritual space is unimportant as it only exists by virtue of the forces or supernatural beings that manifest themselves in it.

Furthermore, it is the appropriate enactment or realization of the ritual act that makes reference to cosmic reality and establishes a socio-psychological link, between the participants and their deity. Therefore, every ritual act or performance is only efficacious if it expresses a need to communicate with supernatural forces or, in African cosmology, the ancestors, who serve as the link between the ordinary world of reality and the supernatural or ethereal world. The emphasis here therefore is on performance and the motive behind it. See [Ganyi and Patrick \(2012\)](#).

This itself is done through offering and incantations which must be appropriately carried out to achieve the desired effect. The ritual priest, as leader, assumes the collective power of the group which affords him, greater efficacy in the performance of his role. All of these actors constitute the performance group in African traditional drama and are equally seen as the creators of beauty in the stylization of their bodies and the entire movements that constitute drama in the traditional context.

Therefore, the dynamic context of performance which is central to all oral narrative traditions affords traditional African drama its unique essence as a dramatic activity. Even though varying according to the genre of performance, this context sustains the virtuosity of all forms of oral narrative traditions including drama and is responsible for the entertainment value and sometimes the satiric quality of African traditional drama. When [Bloch \(1989\)](#) and [Bloch \(2014\)](#) argues that

...ritual obliges participants to use formal oratorical style which is limited to intonation... loudness and fixity of order... which imply speech embellishment that makes the ritual leaders' speech to

become more style than content... (Bloch, 1989)

He is here concerned with the dynamics of contextual performance of ritual which constitute drama not with the content of ritual itself.

In the same vein, Kertzer (1988) definition of ritual as “action wrapped in a web of symbolism” also highlights the dynamics of performance which centres on the symbolism of ritual action. Here, only a dynamic performance context and its accompanying interaction unravels the meaning of the symbolism which may constitute drama. Kertzer argues that the power of different interpretation of the symbolism of ritual has been developed through anthropological approaches to carnival and so the power of ritual derives from its focus on practice. Herein lies the power or potential of ritual as drama; not in the ritual of the carnival but in its potential to generate action i.e. the dynamism of the carnival performance context that allows for several and complex symbolic actions that are capable of diverse interpretations. The ritual is in the symbolism of the carnival but the drama is in the actions and the performances.

Performance contexts are, as such, the proper contexts for the formulation of analytical postulations about traditional African literary constructs – drama, prose, or poetic composition. This is because the influence of orality is still very pervasive in Africa and what can be conceived of as African traditional drama does not exist in the Euro-African models we refer to as modern drama but in the traditional festival and ceremonies that dot the vast African landscape.

Finnegan (1970), postulation about the lack of the dramatic genre in Africa still haunts and stares us in the face because of Euro-African models we refer to as contemporary African drama. This misguided postulation about African traditional drama made (Asagba, 1986) to once again assert that such approaches;

...either reveal the ignorance of the writer of the culture concerned, or represents a calculated attempt by the critic to create stereotypes, or misrepresent a virile and sustaining dramatic and theatrical tradition.

Given these scenarios one must necessarily fall back to the African oral background and the dynamics of the performance context to sustain the roots of African traditional drama like all other forms or genres of oral literature.

## 5. The Dynamics of the Oral Performance Context

The oral performance is the centre of oral literature and the means by which several genres of oral or verbal art, including drama are realized, actualized and externalized. This is done through the interaction between performers and audiences, the most pertinent way by which oral literature is conceptualized. There is, as such, no oral literature without the performance context. African traditional drama, as a genre of oral literature can therefore only be properly appreciated within its performance context. In literary parlance, this implies the “aesthetics” or the beauty of the techniques of oral rendition. As a genre, drama depends on dialogue, costume, props and the spectacle created by the effective combination of all these to aid the deliverance of a message. These techniques, employed by the performers or actors in the realization of aesthetic pleasure, along with the context within which the performance occurs constitute the dynamics of performance and aid the perception of traditional drama. These include the choice of mien by the actors, the appropriate disposition for the deliverance of the message and the creation of the right atmosphere for the performance session. It is also important to note that the right atmosphere or disposition are all mediated by the expectations of the audience members who constitute the final arbiters and who decide what they want and how to categorize the final product of the performance. Traditional drama being the representation of the collective experiences of the people thus becomes the embodiment of their collective vision of the universe and the projection of their cosmic and ethical viewpoint. This means the audience members judge the actors presentations to ensure it conforms to the aesthetic norms of the community or the stylistic devices and techniques of rendition acceptable to the people or prevalent in the milieu.

African traditional drama is therefore mediated by the concept of collective existence inherent in the African environment hence the audience remains vital to the realization of not just the drama but all forms of literary and artistic creations. Art becomes the soul of communal existence. The audience remains an inherent element in the dramatic genre which employs the call and response pattern. Again, the context of performance remains a vital ingredient of traditional drama because it dictates the degree of audience participation and the degree of relationship between audience and performer since actors or artists work within the value systems of their traditional communities’ aesthetic prescriptions.

Another prominent aspect of African traditional drama evident in the performance context is the histrionics or non-verbal gestures adopted by the actors or performers. Even though the performance vastly depends on or is enhanced through dialogue or verbal utterances, gesture also plays a major role in message impartation. Mime and dramatization aid the proper appreciation of cultural symbols and other semiotic devices employed by the actors in the performance. All of these elements enhance beauty and create the difference between what is regarded as a text and the actual events or context of performance.

African traditional drama is therefore realized in the form of a carnival, and comes alive mostly in festivals and such like ceremonies within which a lot is actually communicated outside verbal utterances and in symbolic language. This renders the performance context a more wholesome and worthwhile exercise for the comprehension of cultural norms and values than written texts. The performance context becomes a living experience and the actualization of the dramatic essence without which African traditional drama is non-existent. To this extent therefore, the concept, composition and rendition of African traditional drama within the African context can simply be conceived of as two aspects of the same moment or experience. Elizabeth (1986) , therefore points out that “the

continued vibrancy of African oral literature (especially African drama) hinges on the dynamics of performance associated with the art form.”

African traditional drama is therefore sustained in performance contexts that are closely related to the empirical realities of the social structures on which the lives and cultural values of the people revolve and make meaning in the communities. An analysis of African traditional drama cannot therefore thrive on a Eurocentric perspective but should be based on live performances since the drama thrives on orality central to African life and culture. The dramatic genre in Africa is realized within the ambit of what is moderated and skewed towards what can be regarded as the performer’s conceptual heritage or the political and cultural realities of his environment of origin thus making traditional drama diverse and environmentally or ecologically based.

One therefore hastens to warn that critics of African traditional dramatic concept must not impose their own pre-conceived notions of meaning on the dramatic constructs but must look at the drama from the African oral perspective which is why Kiguli (2012) has pointed out that “our concern should not be the creation of Western equivalents of theory or literary models..., we should not seek to create [dramatic] performances that simply echo European models but rather to give space to the analysis and consequently the understanding of how our contexts work.” (Kiguli, 2012).

African traditional drama must therefore be placed on the same pedestal of a cultural understanding of African history, literature and the societal or cultural values prevalent in our African environment. African traditional drama is distinct, unique and can only be conceptualized within the framework of the African reality of orality and the dynamics of oral performance contexts that enliven and give life and relevance to African experiences which emanate from the ethnohistorical and ethno poetic antecedents of literary creativity peculiar to the African continent and its peoples.

In her summation on oral poetry, Kiguli further asserts that

Performance is a communicative process in which performer, audience and the social practice of oral poetry are vital for the interpretation and understanding of the genre. The performer is important in the performance event and analysing his or her views will contribute to understanding the relationship between performer, composition process, audience, purpose and the overall context in which the performances of oral poetry occur. (Kiguli, 2012).

This summation, it is argued, is also largely, if not entirely, applicable to traditional drama since traditional drama cannot really be divorced from or treated independently of the performance context of oral literature. Infact traditional drama relies more on performance as oral literature is a composite art form that makes no hard and fast distinction between genres. Performance or dramatic enactment can thus be said to be the centre piece of all forms of traditional literary creations. Just as traditional poetry is principally meant for performance (Kunene, 1981), so does traditional drama depend on performances as interaction between performer and audience in the traditional context for its explication. Divorcing traditional drama from its communal context unto a proscenium stage therefore divests it of its essence of traditionality and communal relevance. This is because the relevance of African traditional drama can only be fully realized within its context as an art form that depicts the totality of the world view of the performer, his community or environment of performance in terms of the communal ethos or values, beliefs and ideologies embedded in the dramatic performance. The supposition here is that for an enhanced understanding and appreciation of African traditional drama, it must be performed, studied and analysed within the ethnohistorical and ethnoaesthetic antecedents of the environment of its production that highlight its prominence as an African artistic endeavour.

What this essay has attempted to do herein, is to adopt an approach to African traditional drama that takes African oral literature as it's centre for the theorisation on African traditional drama.

The position answers to Landeg White's postulation that

We need an aesthetic, deriving not from external models or theories of orality but from evidence of African texts and from the comments of performers and audiences from Africa about the nature of the literature they value (White, 1989).

## 6. Conclusion

In conclusion, what this study has achieved is to posit that any study of traditional African drama that utilizes Western analytical tools or standards of dramatic production and representation faces the danger of a failed exercise. This is because it is obvious that drama emanates from the environmental, ecological and cultural factors peculiar to a people. Uprooting traditional African drama from it's milieu and subjecting it to alien analytical postulates not only blurs the form and structure of the drama but also its content and perceptive modes. Traditional African drama is vastly dependent on Orality and representation of the collective ethos of the community and therefore thrives on communal participation. The best approach to this drama therefore is its subjection to analysis within the communal performance context as all other forms of Oral literature within which the interaction between the artist and audience in the dramatic space or playground enhances an understanding of the images utilized and the message being imparted.

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